

# Auto/Biography Review

ISSN: 2755-2772

2023 Published Online First

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<https://Autobiographyreview.com>

## Auto/Biographical Practices, Conventions and Silences: Infamy, Infamy

Invited Article

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### Abstract

Proceeding from remembrance of a friend who has died, ideas about friendship and acquaintanceship are explored, in particular around the conventions and grounded practices of biography. Biographical conventions are strong, but there are subterranean changes in these. At the same time, some of the conventions remain protean and impact on biographical practices. The result is a gap between remembrance of a loved person and biographical accounts - both spoken and written – of what they were like. This is explored around the idea of biographical silences and an unreliable narrator who breaks such silences and is based up a keynote address given at the Auto/Biography Study Group Annual Conference, December 2021.

### Keywords

Friendship, Remembrance, Biographical accounts, Silences, Unreliable narrator

### Introducing Biographical Performances and Silences

When I was invited to give a keynote address at the December 2021 Auto/Biography Study Group annual conference in honour of the late David Morgan, a dear friend, I was both pleased and very sad. There were various ways in which the address could have been given, and eventually, I decided to use it to raise some topics that David would have liked, and if we had met over it, we could have had an interesting conversation about them. So, the tone was conversational and hopefully also provocative in a genial way, something David himself was adept at. And in producing a written version, this tone is retained rather than turning it into a more conventional academic article.

For fans of the 'Carry On' series of comedy films, the words 'infamy, infamy', as in my sub-title, always bring a smile to the face. These words occur in *Carry On Cleo*, perhaps the best of the films. They are uttered by actor Kenneth Williams as Julius Caesar and are followed by 'they've all got it in for me'. Whenever people thought they were being done down and went on about it a little too long, then afterwards and with a twinkle in his eye, David would observe to friends, 'infamy, infamy: we've all got it in for them', and gently send them up. This was genial and usually accompanied by his helpful comments and suggestions to them: it was kindly, while recognising a certain overly lugubrious quality.

How I remember David is as a thankfully imperfect friend with whom I shared bad puns, mild gossip, interesting ideas, funny incidents, short-term obsessions like collecting the names of outlandish museums, who got cross with me and vice versa, and who I loved. I particularly enjoyed his infamy comments and the rather arch way he made them because, while funny in themselves, they also conjured up these other things. I remember this powerful sense of David very well. However, other people, as was apparent after his death, remember him very positively but differently.

A whimsical sense of humour and enjoying the foibles of others were among the foundations of our friendship, along with shared ideas about sociological matters, mixed with some differences and disagreements. But this was not quite David as he was for other people, for these were, and these things still are, relational - a 'David and Liz' thing. People, of course, behave differently towards different people and are responded to differently in turn. We all know this in life. But how does biography, including within the framework of auto/biographical studies, deal with it, and what issues arise? This is my topic.

## **A Failed Shared Project - And A Successful Morgan One**

David Morgan is, of course, well known for his published work on masculinities and on family practices in particular. His two books on family practices, *Family Connections* and *Rethinking Family Practices*, have been especially influential (Morgan 1996, 2011), and this emphasis on practice is one of the things we shared and also differed about. Yes, social practices, but there are many ways to engage with this, and mine is rather different from the direction that his took. And relatedly, the way I comment on these relational matters in this present discussion is, as readers of David's *Acquaintances* (Morgan 2009) will realise, a reconsideration of the ideas about friendship and intimacy as well as acquaintanceship that he presents in this book, which was conceived in a broad auto/biographical frame.

Our difference about practices first became apparent around a shared book project at the turn of the 1990s (our friendship started when I got a lectureship in the sociology department at the University of Manchester at the turn of the 1980s, so this was a decade later). This project was started but never completed. I can't remember its proposed title now, only that a book was to be published by Polity and would examine the practices and circumstances that composed some scandalously failed masculinities, which had occurred in a number of historical circumstances.

We differed about how to do it, how and why to be discussed later, and so the project was jettisoned. But it is important to indicate here that this made small change to our friendship, and in our intellectual lives, we just went fairly separate ways.

Dealing with differences is, of course, part of everyday biographical practices, and these practices add up to how people go about assembling and performing their self to a variety of others in a

range of circumstances. We engage in different kinds of performances, tailored, usually subtly rather than in a sharp Jekyll and Hyde way, for different audiences and situations.

This is what Treva Broughton (2000) has referred to as ‘the course of things’, the business of everyday life, and it is imbued through and through with auto/biographical practices and performances. This is something we take for granted. ‘Oh, he’s different with his grandad’, ‘she doesn’t behave like that with me’, ‘you’re not at work now, so calm down’ – these are things I have heard said, and they convey the situational and relational basis of how people behave. This is as recognisably the same person acting in the same broad way but with important shades of difference discernible in the fabric of different relationships and contexts.

Interesting, then, that the more formalised conventions which surround and condition written biography, and related ways of representing lives, largely fail to register, or sometimes actively exclude, such things. Perhaps this is because this is so taken for granted, so everyday, and in many ways so trivial. Or perhaps not. Perhaps there is more to it than this, a thought which is now pursued.

## Enter An Unreliable Narrator

In biography, the attention is rather on broad-brush work and cleaner, sharper lines in delineating a person, and not such seeming incidentals as bad puns and jokes. And the result tells us sometimes much about the subject’s activities and life-course – but less about what they were like, and whether we would want to spend time with them. So, no wonder, then, that when people buy autobiographies and biographies, the first thing many of us do is to turn to the photographs. Laughter lines, dowdy or smart clothes, the location, and companions in the frame, add to what is in the text - and hint at what is not, what has been omitted.

In exploring why such practices and performances are the stuff of life, but not the stuff of the written texts called biography and autobiography, what is needed is an unreliable narrator. That is, we need a narrator who says or writes too much, or too little, and as a result keeps readers on our metaphorical toes, in hinting at the things off frame, in helping us hear the things silenced, in encouraging us to grapple with puzzles that have been vanished.

And at this point, the metaphorical door opens and enter Thomas Carlyle (1987 [1836]) holding out to us *Sartor Resartus*, his comic novel, or biography, or autobiography, or review, or philosophical exposition, call it what you will. *Sartor Resartus*, the tailor re-stitched (or, in today’s parlance, stitched up), is a book which fictionalises and sends up the factual pretensions and practices of editors and writers of biography, philosophy, and related enquiries.

The book’s protagonist is an unnamed editor who attempts to review a (made-up) book by Diogenes Teufelsdröckh called ‘Clothes, Their Origin and Influence’. Teufelsdröckh (it translates as something like ‘god-born devil poo’) is Professor of ‘Things in General’ at an obscure German university. This unnamed editor struggles to make sense of Teufelsdröckh’s book and write a review of it and eventually writes to the author. A response comes from Teufelsdröckh’s office in the form of several bags of paper scraps organised according to the signs of the zodiac, with autobiographical snippets written on them. The editor tries to piece together the draft review, his notes, the book, and Teufelsdröckh’s autobiographical scraps, in a way that makes sense, and in doing so, his own complex biographical circumstances add to the complexities.

The editor, however, is eventually defeated in his intention to write the review. Instead, he gets on with his life, life outside the review, beyond the text.

## Learning Some Lessons? Taking What We Want

There are lessons we as readers are meant to learn from this. There are five points I take from it, which are perhaps not the lessons Carlyle intends, but they are the things that stand out for me. Firstly, as members of the Auto/Biography Study Group, we can and do take for granted that, in ways of representing lives, there are mixed genres. It is taken for granted that the fictional and the factual, the biographical and the autobiographical, overlap each other, with complex effects. Also, we appreciate too that there are 'messy texts' because there are complicated lives.

Secondly, we study group colleagues also take for granted, at least on one level, that we are complicit in not taking this on board and fundamentally changing analytical practices, for in the end, we face the same kinds of problems that Carlyle's editor did but continue nonetheless. Life is complicated, representing a life, in whatever ways we do so, is full of difficulty, and the issues arising are often unresolvable. Our attempts always fall short. But more often than not, this is unacknowledged.

Therefore 'at least on one level' appears in the above paragraph because, in the end, in the academic context, we still nonetheless pronounce generalisations, conclusions and so on, rather than 'I can't make sense of it'. We bracket the complications and unresolvable issues instead and produce something that will do. But this is not necessarily so in life, for people generally are much readier to hold up their hands and say things like, 'it's too confusing, I don't understand'. The academic production imperative requires output, whereas in life, attempts to understand can be given up on.

Thirdly, the protagonist in Carlyle's book is named an editor, and this is because when representing lives and in whatever medium, there is always an 'editorial function' involved. It involves people, us, as writers and editors, stitching together disparate elements and, in so doing, bracketing many things out and selecting some things in. There is always an inescapable selectivity involved, then, because not everything important, let alone the less important, can be included.

Fourthly, this selectivity results in silences. All manner of things become omitted, and there are conventions surrounding this regarding what it is seemly to include and what it is not. Some of the things I have mentioned - like sending people up and cracking bad jokes - and many more I haven't mentioned but could have, generally lie over the dividing line. That is, such silences are not happenstance or random. And as a result, problems regarding knowledge result. In particular, very often, the attractiveness or repellent character of someone, and all the small things which convey 'what they were like' as a person, lie in such things and are lost because silenced.

And fifthly, regarding the terms 'the writer and editor', read 'all of us', both in life and in our specific academic work, including within the framework of auto/biographical studies. That is, what we piece together in one context, in the rest of life with all its confusions and complications, in the other, in academia, is often excluded by the tools of our trade and the scholarly practices they give rise to.

Using the tools of the trade and grappling with alternating clamour and silence in the face of these representational difficulties, Carlyle's scholarly editor gave up. We plod on, hopefully. Academic articles and book chapters are a testament to this, in which interpretations are reached, conclusions drawn, and expertise is gained.

## Living A Life, Representing A Life: It's A Scandal

At this point, I return to my opening comments. These concern the performances and practices that go into making a life in everyday circumstances and the rather different ones that characterise representational forms such as biography and autobiography. Doing so also returns to another earlier point, that David and I differed regarding how to explore the auto/biographical practices that went into making scandals around infamous masculinities. These differences then set both of us in motion long term, in developing different approaches to thinking and writing about the self and its dealings with others.

In representing a life - and staying with biography here rather than related forms like autobiography and memoir - some things are selected in, others selected out, and silences and representational oddities result. And surrounding and shaping this are the conventions of what biography, what a *good* biography, what a good biography *now* rather than a hundred years ago, should be like. And as this awkward sentence conveys, the conventions are not set in stone, although it sometimes feels like it, but have changed quite profoundly over time.

This is because there are some broad underpinning taken-for-granted assumptions, which I wrote about a good few years ago now in *The Auto/Biographical I* (Stanley 1992). And that they are still prevalent indicates something about the *longue duree* tectonic movement of these conventions rather than rapid change.

The vast majority of biography still adopts a *spotlight* approach, in focusing on a particular subject or individual rather than on prosopography and connections or networks. While biography generally looks at the development of a self, a person, it usually sees this in terms of the unfolding of a pattern of character traits and so in *stasis* rather than being situationally and relationally performative, apart from in exceptional circumstances. These circumstances are the inclusion of exceptional *events and epiphanies* which propel change rather than focusing on the day-to-day routine and mundane processes of living a life. And most biography has a *bildungsroman* narrative form, expressing an onward and upward, or downward, development of the self in its essential aspects, that is, the unfolding inbuilt character traits referred to above. Although these things underpin the conventions of written biography, they are different from what other people and ourselves are like in life and the ways in which we react to people and everyday biographical practices.

Against the *spotlight* approach, we live within networks of sociality, and picking us out individually both makes limited sense but also destroys the essence of who and what we are. Prosopography is the name of life, biography in its conventional spotlight form is a lonely poor relation. Against *stasis*, we present ourselves somewhat differently in different situations. How people behave is relational and situational. Against *events* prototypically, it is not seismic events that shape us and our lives, but more the slow unfolding of life, work, and all the people, activities and occurrences these are composed by. And, of course, recognising here that for many people in far too many places, seismic events are themselves routinised and become an everyday fabric. And against the *bildungsroman*, the conventional narrative of the *bildungsroman* is precisely that, a conventionalised form that gives a particular developmental shape to a life, whereas, in practice, lives are generally more lumpy, bumpy, uneven, forwards and backwards.

It was regarding such things that the parting of intellectual ways occurred for the shared book project on scandalous masculinities that David and I had started. Our difference - disagreement is perhaps too strong a word - was at the level of the micro fabric of what we were intending to write about, in how we were intending to substantiate the broad ideas we had, rather than 'big ideas' as such.

The book was to have focused on case studies of men in situations involving public or semi-public scandals concerning failed or rejected masculinities, particularly sexualised masculinities. These scandals were all infamous in their time and included John Ruskin and the non-consummation and annulment of his marriage, William Morris and his open marriage, Charles Kingsley and marital lustful religious fervour and pain, Archbishop Benson and his gay wife and children, and similar scandals.

## **The End or The Beginning? More Autobiographical Practices**

David and I agreed the project, wrote a proposal and negotiated a book contract with Polity. Then I went to various archives, to letters and diaries, to legal documents, to the network circulation of gossip these intimated, to open scandal and how it was manifested, to the histories of these family troubles as they travelled over time. The demise of the shared project occurred over how much of a presence and in what ways the everyday unfolding of these things was to have in how we engaged with scandalous masculinities and the contexts these played out in.

It turned out that David was more interested in the family aspects and in practices as such, while I was more interested in the minutiae and how scandals seeped into public or semi-public knowledge. I also focused on the character of the representations as such. Limited and partial, the remaining evidential traces are like abandoned bits of an old jigsaw-puzzle, with many pieces missing and no picture, and they should not be used referentially as though supplying the facts.

David went in a different direction, firstly into a proposed book intended to theorise masculinity in a rather different way than he had previously, something never completed (although I understand some parts are extant and might eventually be published). And secondly, and in particular, his work shifted into his influential interrogation of family practices, alluded to earlier in this discussion.

Practices were in the air at the time. David's first (I think) published intimation of his turn to family practices came in his interesting comment on an article by Graham Crow (Morgan 1989). My own first foray concerned auto/biographical practices, in a book chapter edited by Alison Donnell and the late lamented Pauline Polkey, which was on auto/biographical practices and the idea of a contact zone in particular (Stanley 1989).

The shared book project failed in the same period of time. However, my 1989 contact zone chapter, like David's 1989 comment, was a harbinger of things to come and is marked by things which continue to mark my work. Referentiality, with its fascinating troubles for me, remains at the heart of auto/biographical practices, which are always relational and grounded in the specifics of time and place, along with history, biography and social structure. And the latter, social structure, has been increasingly part of my long-term auto/biographical research in South Africa (Stanley 2017). Practices, however, is something I have used in a looser way than appears in David's work, in my case, as part of the business of everyday life seen in auto/biographical terms.

## **Horses For Courses: Methodological Thoughts**

There are some similarities in how David's work developed and mine, as well as significant differences. And as David wrote about practices in the two books mentioned earlier, *Family Connections* and *Rethinking Family Practices* (Morgan 1996, 2011), these can be drawn on in discussing the differences.

The main aspects that compose practices in David's work, and which appear in these two books and related work, are that the perspectives of actor and observer are conjoined, that practices

involve activities, they centre on the everyday, they are characterised by regularity as well as fluidity, and looking at them in detail reveals the links between history and biography. These points are detailed in the two books referred to and so will not be elaborated here. What I want to comment on instead are aspects that are not explicitly discussed but are in the background and help point up the fount of differences. They are methodological in character, for as noted earlier, it was not 'big ideas' that led to a parting of the ways. This was differences in approach that can be seen as methodological in character.

Family v. social life. David's attention is on the family as a vector for practices rather than the many other contexts and circumstances that compose social life. For me, when used without the family context, the idea of practices as a conceptual tool shapes up rather differently from the list of attributes summarised from David's two family practices books.

Now v. then. David's focus is on 'now', rather than back 'then' beyond first-hand memory. For me, back then, back beyond living memory, imposes a particular analytical disciplining on researchers because it means that the question of representation necessarily takes a key position.

Here v. there. David's focus is also on 'here', tacitly the northern parts of the world and its family practices, rather than 'there' and its preoccupations and meanings. And practices. For me, the context I have chosen to work in, in South Africa and across a two hundred year period, problematises these assumptions, including displacing a rich north version of family ties as a dominating structural form.

Sources v. representations. For David, the sources drawn on provide data about these matters, including the practices involved. For me, issues concerning referentiality and representation are fundamental, and the ensuing problematics must be upfront reckoned with.

I have presented these methodological matters in a rather sharp way, as one versus the other. This is to make the point that there are real and significant factors involved. These are not light or unimportant choices, and they give rise to different bodies of work. But I also want to emphasise that they do not have any intended ethical clout attached to them, of a 'his is a better approach, and mine is worse' kind. And in reverse, I'm not claiming epistemic privilege for my approach, either.

Both are supportable ways to carry out research on practices within an auto/biographical framework. Both were assembled over time to address different issues and to research different topics. And it is important to emphasise this last point because the assumption is often made that we researchers have a position, an approach or a perspective which remains constant, no matter what the research or writing project that is involved.

My view is different and is that it should be a matter of horses for courses. This is implicit in the differences between David's approach and my own. Put simply, it was not that we disagreed about major things like masculinities and power and the social order, but instead that we wanted to do different things because we were investigating different matters – me the twists and turns of representation, David the shaping and unfolding of family practices – and so needed to do this in different ways.

And I stand by this, that in a methodological sense, what we do and how we do it should depend on the 'it' that we are investigating. So, for example, if I want to know how ordinary white South Africans behaved during the 1940s and the rise of the apartheid state, or if I want to know how schoolchildren in present-day Johannesburg understand HIV issues, adopting the same approach to both ought to raise some methodological eyebrows. And so with the different things that David and I wanted to know.

## Two Conclusions and A Comment

One conclusion to what I have been discussing consists in some interconnected truisms. These are: that life is complicated; that the practices of life and relationship are everyday largely mundane stuff; that the practices of formal biography are conventionalised and exclusionary; that auto/biographical studies came into existence to grapple with the ensuing complexities, but many of these are unresolvable; and that auto/biographical research is not immune from representing its findings as though certain because of what has become its own prevailing conventions about what is important and to be included, what is unseemly and to be omitted.

My other conclusion is that the intricacies and meaning of friendship – long-term loving friendship – is more like the relationship of acquaintances than David perceives in his book of this title. Actually, a close friendship is not necessarily about the different kinds of intimacy he associates with it. Concerning my friendship with David, for instance, it has inhered in the supposedly little things, but which constitute the many ties that bind us one person to another and form a taken-for-granted substrata to a close relationship.

This returns us to Treva Broughton (2000) and the importance of the course of things. The routine and everyday aspects of close relationships have importance in the practices of life, not least because deeper emotions often come to the surface through such everyday mundane means. Things like giggling over ‘infamy, infamy’, disagreeing about how to write a book, and having different views of acquaintanceship, convey much to me about my loved friend David Morgan. However, the obituaries I have read and heard describe a paragon more than a real person, albeit produced by people as close or closer to him than I was. Maybe this was so –, but it is not quite as I knew him.

What auto/biographical studies has been consistently good at is in recognising this disjuncture between the formalities and the everyday realities and instead exploring the manifold everyday, the supposedly trivial, but which is actually momentarily important. But, there are still those irresolvable issues regarding selectivity, silencing and the editorial function mentioned earlier around *Sartor Resartus*.

And so, on the encouraging note that there is more to do and areas of research and analysis that auto/biographical studies can still make groundbreaking contributions to (Parsons and Chappell 2020), this discussion now ends. To David Morgan, then, a loved friend and a treasured member of what Georg Simmel (1995 [1908]) has called the republic of scholars.

## Acknowledgments

My thanks to the auto/biography study group members who responded to the spoken version of this article.

## Funding

The author received no funding for this piece.

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